

THEODORE DREISER'S SISTER CARRIE IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF EXISTENTIALISM – A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore and identify the theory of existentialism in Theodore Dreiser's first fiction, Sister Carrie. Existentialism is a theory which advocates free existence in the sophisticated society and also individual's freedom of choice in taking a decision. Existentialism states that man exists and in that existence man defines himself and the world in his own subjectivity, and wanders between choice, freedom, and existential angst. Not only that, the consequences of the decision making is accepted without regretting, for even if it is a wrong decision. The judgement, the choices, the resultant acts and its consequences are the determining factors since 'Existence precedes essence' and social values are disregarded. The theory of existentialism is applied to analyse the work of Dreiser whose writings replicates and criticizes his contemporary American society, especially women. One of his works, Sister Carrie is taken for the study and it is analysed through the concept of existentialism by adopting textual analysis method.

KEY WORDS: Existentialism, Freedom of Choice, Existential Angst, Theodore Dreiser & Sister Carrie

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INTRODUCTION

Theodore Dreiser's maiden novel, *Sister Carrie* is dealt with in the perspective of existentialism. Dreiser is an American naturalist and realist and he explores the facts of American society, women in particular, during his period. The novel *Sister Carrie* revolves around Carrie Meeber, who becomes a mistress of two men and later on as successful high paid actress experiencing unhappiness and loneliness. This novel depicts Dreiser's contemporary American women and it is considered as 'greatest of all American urban novels'. Since Dreiser is a realist and naturalist, he had used pragmatic technique in his novel *Sister Carrie* which can be inferred through the philosophy of existentialism. Existentialism is a literary phenomenon which emphasises on an individual's responsibility for his experiences, freedom of choice and the consequences that he faces as an impact of his decision. Dreiser had speckled with the features of existentialism in *Sister Carrie* like loneliness, alienation, anxiety, nothingness and among all these features, existence precedes essence is the most significant. Through the above characteristics of existentialism, *Sister Carrie* can be interpreted.

THE KEYCHARACTERISTICS OF EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism theory emphasises on free existence of a human being and since the individual is responsible for his choices and decisions, he undergoes certain emotions which can be categorised as the attributes of existentialism such as; shadows of loneliness, anxiety and depression; inability to understand the depth of life;

constant lurking fear of death; and among all these, existence comes prior to essence which is the main argument of Sartre in his existentialist theory. Jean-Paul Sartre was the first to coin the word existentialism and he states that “for human being existence precedes essence”. His theory voices that, “man first of all exists, encounters himself, surge up in the world-and defines himself afterwards” which can be experienced in *Sister Carrie*. The above given features of existentialism can be implemented and analysed in Theodore Dreiser’s maiden novel *Sister Carrie*.

The Story Line of Sister Carrie

Before analysing the theory with the novel, here is the story outline of *Sister Carrie* for better interpretation of the text, theory and the incidents which gives evidence to the theory.

Sister Carrie is a novel about a young girl named Carrie, very ambitious and confident to decide her life. She boards a train to Chicago with an illusion of her dreams and gets acquainted with a wealthy man, Charles Drouet. She starts to enjoy a luxurious life with the admirable Drouet. Through the aristocratic Drouet, her acquaintance gets closer to the dissolute George Hurst wood, a corrupt hotel manager, who starts an affair with Carrie. Carrie abandons the gentle and loving Drouet and lives with the infatuated Hurst wood. Carrie’s life with the bankrupt Hurst wood becomes miserable and at this point, Carrie starts to realise her desire to fulfil her dreams instead of serving as a mistress to men. She gets a chance to prove her talent as an actress. She abandons the unadjustable Hurst wood on the streets and becomes a successful actress and gains stardom but on the other side, the deceptive Hurst wood is alienated and concludes his life by committing suicide due to his misfortunes that he has faced in his life. Carrie acts according to her desires, follows her will and she readily accepts all the consequences of her decision. The novel ends with the rise of Carrie and downfall of Hurst wood. The rise and fall of both the characters are rooted in their decision making and their freedom of choice.

As per Sartre’s words, *Sister Carrie* also exists in her town; she encounters herself into the new society, conceives a desire and surges up in the world without any morality, gratitude, or loyalty and defines herself as a successful actress. To put it in a nutshell, the novel *Sister Carrie* is embedded with the characteristics of existentialism.

Existential Loneliness

Existential Loneliness is a way to tackle one’s own subjective truth, confronting the unpredictable future of human condition and discovering one’s own questions regarding their human existence. A lonely individual seeks to grab some meaning in the face of life’s impermanence. According to Soren Kierkegaard, man’s first existentialist condition is his aloneness in life. Man is alone in this world and he has the will to make his decision. He decides his choice and regrets for the choices he makes. He suffers from anxiety and dreads death. At times, he is unable to find answers to the miseries, anxieties and his problems that he faces in his life. In a sheer peak of a struggle, at one point, he finds the meaning and substance for his existence. He sorts out his problems and realises that he cannot skip any situations in his life. He has to undergo all the situations and the consequences of his decisions that he faces in his life. Committing suicide is not an answer to the problems, plights and predicament faced by the humanity.

Similarly, after committing all her sins like ingratitude, disloyalty and immorality towards the other characters to satisfy her desire to be rich and luxurious, Carrie also experiences loneliness in the end of the novel. She garnished her career with fortune and wealth but without happiness and peace. “It is when the feet weary and hope seems vain that the heartaches and the longings arise” (500) She feels her aloneness and loneliness in her life,

“Applause there was, and publicity-once far off, essential things, but now grown trivial and indifferent.

Beauty also- her type of loveliness- and yet she was lonely. In her rocking-chair she sat, when not otherwise engaged-singing and dreaming” (499)

And she tries to satiate those feeling by dreaming and yearning. “In your rocking-chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long alone. In your rocking-chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel.” (500). On one hand, Carrie is lonely in her life, sitting in her rocking chair and dreaming of her future and on the other hand, Hurst wood is alienated by his family, abandoned by Carrie and left out on the streets with nothing. His loneliness gives a chance to question about his future and finds out the reason for his existence in this world. So, Loneliness is a possible medium for a more purposeful and engaging life, and an avenue for heightened self-awareness.

Crafting Something Out of Nothingness

Existentialism holds on to the statement that as there is no God or any transcendent force in this world and the only way to resolve this nothingness is to embrace existence. Everything in this world starts with nothing. Man creates something out of nothing and makes it successful. It is because, he creates a reason for his existence and chases that reason to make something and become successful. According to Jean-Paul Sartre, life begins in void and ends in void. He defines “human consciousness as being a nothingness in the sense of no-thingness, and placed it in opposition to being, that is thing-ness.” In the same way, Carrie starts her life in Chicago with nothing but a desire to be luxurious. The desire becomes a reason and motive for all her moves in the novel and she ends in obtaining stardom as an actress. “Here was Carrie, in the beginning poor, unsophisticated, emotional; responding with desire to everything most lovely in life, yet finding herself turned as by a wall.” (499). Carrie aims to reach the drastic heights of her desire in a short period of time and chooses the immoral path. Carrie says,

“If honest labour be unremunerative and difficult to endure; if it be the long, long road which never reaches beauty, but wearies the feet and the heart; if the drag to follow beauty be such that one abandons the admired way, taking rather the despised path leading to her dreams quickly, who shall cast the first stone? Not evil, but longing for that which is better, more often directs the steps of the erring. Not evil, but goodness more often allures the feeling mind unused to reason” (499)

Depression

Existentialism quotes that individuals are free and should take up their own personal responsibility, along with which comes existential depression and existential anxiety. Existential Depression is a depression that can be experienced by the individuals in certain basic issues of existence like, before taking a decision, death, freedom and meaninglessness of life. Carrie is being pushed and pulled in between two decisions. Carrie experiences this depression when Drouet offers her a flat and some money and asks her to stay with him. Carrie is being pushed out by Minnie, her sister, due to her penniless state and pulled by Drouet for his love and care towards Carrie. “Her face expressed the mingled expectancy, dissatisfaction, and depression she felt”. (54) Drouet, the saving hands, felt depressed and hurt by Carrie’s thoughts. The ungrateful Carrie didn’t have any love towards Drouet but only a satisfier of the self-loving Carrie’s materialistic desires. Carrie’s infatuation towards Hurst wood and her shallowness in Drouet’s relationship were known to Drouet and so he felt hurt and angry. “He felt really hurt as he thought of his treatment, and looked as if he saw no way of obtaining justice”. (226) Carrie made a wrong decision of choosing to start up an affair with Hurst wood without knowing that he was married and had kids. She admits that she made a wrong decision in the lines, “There must be some way round, some

way to make her own up that he was right and she was wrong- to patch up a peace and shut out Hurst wood forever". (229).

Inability to Understand the Depths of Life

Life is short and difficult to understand but at times if one tries to understand ones existence and finds a meaning for existence, then life seems to be interesting. If not, then life seems to be nothing and miserable. The highest peak of inability to interpret the depth of life is suicide and it can be explored in Hurst wood's character in the novel *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser's brick by brick dismantling of Hurst wood's career shows the decline of his character. Hurst wood was abandoned by Carrie and his life on streets was pathetic. He wandered in hunger on the streets even in winter weather. He ate free food given by the charity. He was psychologically disturbed and led an aimless life. "He was altogether a fine example of great mental perturbation". (238) When Carrie wrote a goodbye letter to Hurst wood, he conceived a positive thought from her words. That is,

"He was slightly depressed at the tenor of the note for the first few minutes, but soon recovered. "She wouldn't write at all if she didn't care for me." This was his one resource against the depression which held him. He could extract little from the wording of the letter, but the spirit he thought he knew." (255)

At first, he regained his spirit but later he felt dejected and chooses to end his life. He was abandoned by everyone including his family, job, money and Carrie and he lost his life being alienated. His last words were ""What's the use?" he said, weakly, as he stretched himself to rest." (498). This pathetic end of Hurst wood is the impact of his wrong decision and to escape from it, he ends his life. He experiences a mid-life crisis and loses everything in the pursuit of happiness. The dissolute Hurst wood made his own decisions and followed his desire in a deceptive way. His character is justified by Dreiser, making him alienated from his kith and he gives up his life for his meaningless existence. Until we fix a goal and understand the meaning of life, existence seems to be interesting and happy, but after achieving the goal there is no meaning in an individual's existence. So, to overcome this one should keep fixing goals and setting meaning to their lives to stay happy.

Dread

Dread is a common factor of existentialism. Different existentialists had given different views and terms for 'dread'. According to Kierkegaard, "dread is inbuilt in an individual as a means for God to call us to make a commitment of a moral and spiritual way of life despite the void of meaninglessness before us." Martin Heidegger used the term "angst to find a meaning in a meaningless universe and of finding rational justification for subjective choices about irrational issues". Sartre uses the word "anguish to describe the realization that humans have total freedom of choice in terms what we can do that there are no real constraints on us but for those we choose to impose". Along with existence comes the angst because of the personal responsibility of one's own future. An individual experience dread due to his freedom of choice and the righteousness of his choice. The individual is responsible for the good and bad that he faces, due to his freedom of choice. If his choice is right, he enjoys his life and if it is wrong, then his life becomes miserable.

In *Sister Carrie*, Hurst wood and Carrie undergo dread in different circumstances. Hurst wood had stolen money from his restaurant to elope with Carrie. He was chased by the cops. On chasing him, the cops fired at him. The gun shot made him nervous and frightened. "He walked nervously to the corner and hurried down a side street. "Whew!" he said, drawing in his breath." (425) His guilty conscience was disturbing him and he suffered from fear of arrest and so he

planned and made arrangements to give back the amount. "And it was distressing. He soon found that freedom from fear of arrest was not the *sine qua non* of his existence." (294). The gradual decline of Hurst wood's life started when he became a penniless man, and when Carrie abandoned Hurst wood for the sake of earning money, he was thrown out on the streets. He tried to meet Carrie in a playhouse but he was thrown out. He felt ashamed of his condition and he was haunted by hopelessness. He says,

"God damned dog!" he said. "Damned old cur," wiping the slush from his worthless coat. "I-I hired such people as you once." Now a fierce feeling against Carrie welled up-just one fierce, angry thought before the whole thing slipped out of his mind. Hopelessly he turned back into Broadway again and slopped onward and away begging, crying, losing track of his thoughts, one after another, as a mind decayed and disjoined is wont to do." (493)

Though Carrie left Hurst wood, she was concerned about him and his state of mind. Hurst wood did not return back to his house and She didn't find him anywhere for some days. She dreads not only for his condition but also for his return in to her life. "Not finding him, her dread lifted, and she felt more kindly toward him. She quite forgot him until about to come out, after the show, when the chance of his being there frightened her." (438). Dread, anxiety, fear or anguish; whatever may be the term but it's all are based on human existence and the way the choices are made. If a right decision is made, then an individual can overcome the dread or fear and be successful.

CONCLUSIONS

Existentialism deals with the experiences of individuals and their decisions. Dreiser says that,

"People do not grieve so much sometimes over their own state as we imagine. They suffer, but they bear it manfully. They are distressed, but it is about other things as a rule than their actual state at the moment. The victim, meanwhile, for the single day or morrow, is not actually anguished. He meets his unfolding fate by the minute and the hour as it comes." (74)

Dreiser's characters make choices, change directions and learn lessons from their faults. All three characters are well-drawn and three-dimensional. Carrie had gained experiences instead of her growth. She had self-interest but it was not strong. She was too shallow in her relationships, grabs her opportunities when it is offered and keeps moving on with her life. She overcomes all her sufferings and emerges herself as a successful, self-governing individual and a powerful spirit in her society. Carrie represents the modern women of twentieth century in America. As per the theories of Sartre and Kierkegaard, Carrie, Drouet and Hurst wood make their own choices and gains experiences through their wrong decision. They suffer due to the outcome of their wrong choices. Carrie is elevated to a lofty and luxurious tower, entering the sparkling world which is brittle and fragile, whereas, Hurst wood struggles hard to survive in the streets and turns ruined. Of all the three protagonists one is destroyed, one reaches the stardom and the other passes through unscathed. Thus, the important characteristics of existentialism pervade through the novel *Sister Carrie* and are manifested by the characters.

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